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# Telling No Lies': Building a Strong U.S. Constituency for Africa and Related Issues in the Obama Era

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'TELLING NO LIES': BUILDING A STRONG  
US CONSTITUENCY FOR AFRICA & RELATED ISSUES  
IN THE OBAMA ERA

BY  
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FOR  
THE OBAMA AND AFRICA WHICH WAY  
CONFERENCE  
SYRACUSE  
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*Introduction- All the elements seem to be in place for excellent organizing and constituency building in the United States for Africa and Africa-related issues. Africa is more visible than ever before. There are a multiplicity of creative and excellent web sites, many of which are in instantaneous contact with counterpart bodies on the continent. US citizens have been traveling to various African countries in record numbers. There are growing numbers of African immigrants and African immigrant organizations in the USA. Africa is commanding new levels of attentiveness from such powerful quarters as China and emerging progressive countries in Latin America like Brazil, Bolivia and Columbia. There are national bodies like Africa Action and Trans Africa Forum. The numbers of African American elected officials are at new and record levels. And above all, there is the Barack Obama factor-an African American President of the United States with Kenyan ancestry. This short paper seeks to address some of the challenges and imperatives that must be confronted if there is to be a new, coherent and progressive US policy towards Africa that is rooted in and motored by a strong and well-organized base working in solidarity with African aspirations and drives on the continent. The main contention in this paper is that a multiracial mass base of people concerned with Africa must be built in the USA in order for the Obama/Biden administration to implement a new and lasting, progressive US government policy towards African countries.*

What made the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the USA effective, as was the case with anti-apartheid movements worldwide, was the fact that thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations nationwide, moved by righteous anger, took coordinated actions opposing the apartheid government. Worldwide, around the struggle to change one single country



grew up universal slogans and terms like “Bring Him Back Home!” “Divest Now!” slogans that enjoined the congealed outrage of community groups, unions, universities, high schools and churches. From Amsterdam and Accra to Tokyo and San Francisco **thousands of ordinary people** took action against a glaring and intransigent case of racial injustice. The recent revisionism in US coverage of this global social movement has included a pattern of situating anti-apartheid work solely within the province of Black American political activity. It is a tendency that, along with other recent developments, is only serving to isolate the Black American struggle from the remainder of the world’s progressive movements and struggles.

I wish to assert that the US Anti-Apartheid Movement never belonged to only one grouping of peoples or one region. Part of its uniqueness in the annals of social change movements in the USA was that the US Anti-Apartheid Movement was multi-racial, trans-class, and national (including Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico) in its scope. Anti-Apartheid movements in other multiracial countries (e.g., Great Britain, Australia, France) also consisted of diverse strands of activists.

This is not to say that in the USA there was one big organization with no tensions and contradictions. There were many contradictions and multiple issues. And at times they permeated, if not dominated the political agenda. The contradictions themselves became a source of change and the political maturation of the movement. Despite how frustrating and paralyzing they were, at times, these class, race and gender challenges within the US anti-apartheid struggle provided and yet provide (in the long term) a rich bedrock for discussion and strategizing towards not only ending apartheid but also for transformative social change in America. The anti-apartheid movement became a school for many of us. We began undoing the racism, bigotry and chauvinism with which we had been endowed. We began to struggle with the problematic of doing multiracial, social change work in the racially polarized atmosphere of the United States. We began learning about combating a much more pervasive "enemy," that being the inequities and exploitation attendant upon capitalism itself.

These observations and my perspective are not intended in any way to misestimate the particular and historic contribution of the US Black American community to the African continent's liberation struggle(s). There is no doubt in my mind that various Black Americans- individuals and



organizations-have made the leading, if not 'critical' contributions to many arenas of social change in the USA, including but not limited to the Anti-Apartheid Movement and solidarity work with Africa. The longevity of our work in Africa- from that of Robeson, DuBois, Garvey, Hunton, and the Council on African Affairs to today's work by Danny Glover, Imani Countess, Nicole Lee and Gerald LeMelle , Africa Action and TransAfrica Forum- is a testament to our essentialness and perseverance. Highlighting this history, Francis Nesbitt's new book, Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994, correctly underscores such extraordinary moments as the Council on African Affairs' 1946 solidarity rally with the South African mine workers strike of that same year. Held at Madison Square Garden in New York, it drew over 19,000 people. In her 1996 book Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960, Dr. Brenda Plummer points out that by the end of the 1960's, it was largely, black American leaders and activists who had succeeded in publicly linking the achievement of racial justice in the USA with US foreign policy actions, especially those in Africa and the Caribbean. Consistently, on US foreign policy matters, it has been African Americans who have had progressive and cutting edge positions, especially when it comes to matters regarding peace and international justice questions. It is my view that the

failure of the Darfur solidarity campaign to achieve its major objectives can, in part, be attributed to the fact that the African American community in the US has not significantly galvanized or mobilized around the Darfur issue.<sup>1</sup>

From its earliest days, the US Anti-apartheid movement had international linkages. The Council on African Affairs and various Black American church organizations were in constant communication with the African National Congress from 1912 onwards. From the 1940's onwards, besides the connections to South Africa, Ethiopia, Nyasaland and elsewhere in the "Mother Land," there were the formal links to the British and Belgian Anti-Apartheid Movements, to Canadian groups, to the French, the Swedes, the Japanese, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Jamaicans, the Trinidadians and the Ghanaians. Beyond the international links forged by the national Africa activist organizations like ACOA, (later) TransAfrica, and the Free South African Movement, there were the international ties in church, legislature, university and labor sectors. Additionally, the manifold and varied local organizations in the USA had their own separate and distinct bonds with anti-apartheid groups and bodies overseas from Europe

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<sup>1</sup>A major reason for this failure is that many in the African American community know too little about Darfur as an issue. See Dyer, Ervin, "Black Americans quiet on Darfur crisis," Pittsburg Post Gazette, April 10, 2006 and International Crisis Group, Zogby International Opinion Survey, "Do Americans Care about Darfur? [www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF). The complicatedness of this question is well presented in Mamdani, Mahmood, "How Can We Name the Darfur Crisis: Some Preliminary Thoughts," The BlackCommentator, October 14, 2004.



to the Phillipines, from Cuba to China, as well as in Africa, including, and maybe *especially* in, South Africa.

Today, the people doing African solidarity work are no longer the stalwarts who gallantly and idealistically filled the ranks in the anti-apartheid struggle. The anti-apartheid activists of yesterday are some of the mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles of the youth who canvassed and organized for the Biden and Obama Democratic ticket. Few of the parents remain active and vigilant on African issues.

In the 1960' - 1980's period they were living out their radical imaginings as some describe it. Many doing anti-apartheid work did what they did because of more than the simple desire to eliminate apartheid. Certainly, ending a situation premised on total racism was a central motive. But there was more. Historian Robin Kelley from the University of Southern California described the period's social movements as [doing]...what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, *enable us to imagine a new society* ."<sup>2</sup> (emphasis mine) Many people in the international arena doing anti-apartheid work and

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<sup>2</sup> Kelley, Robin, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), Beacon Press, Boston, p. 9.

especially people at the front lines who, arms in hand, were daily engaging the defenders of apartheid, did what they did envisioning another society, another ordering of the world. One of Namibia's leading liberation war scholars writing on the independence struggle from 1960-1990 puts it clearly:

“...the anti-colonial movement's proclaimed goals and perspectives were not only about fighting the oppressive and exploitative system of apartheid colonialism. The liberation struggle was at the same time about creating conditions for a better life after apartheid – not only in terms of political and human rights but also with regard to the inextricably linked material dimensions to human well being and a decent living of those previously marginalized and excluded from the benefits of the wealth created (to a large extent by them).”<sup>3</sup>

Today, the key to shaping an alternative US policy towards Africa, one that is both progressive and coherent, is the construction of an informed and broad public base organized to promote Africa and African interests. Thus, the first major challenge today is to build such a base (or at least strengthen what exists) which addresses the Africa of 2009 and not the Africa of the heady-now oft times romanticized- days of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Reaching this goal is going to require systematic mobilizing in churches, mosques, synagogues, schools, community centers, universities and work places around the multiple issues and challenges, most of which are more complex and nuanced than the single issue of apartheid racism, which face

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<sup>3</sup>Melber, Henning, “Poverty, politics, power and privilege: Namibia's black economic elite formation,” in Melber, Henning, ed., Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom? (2007). The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, p.110.



Africa today. Organized labor, for instance, especially the AFL-CIO, hostile to any outside advise and assistance, needs coaching and guiding into taking more Africa-friendly positions around trade and development policies. Labor and others in the US need to move closer to their counterpart unions in Canada and the Nordic countries adopting the philosophical perspective that Africa's needs are their needs. It is a cardinal contention of this paper that the only way that an Obama administration will adopt even the shell of a progressive Africa policy is if there is a strong and organized mass base amongst US voters pressuring the adoption of such a policy framework.<sup>4</sup> Without that mass base, it is completely predictable that an Obama/Biden/Clinton administration will take such steps as adopting and imposing a US Africa Command on various hitherto reluctant African countries, eloquently framing it within the "global war on terrorism," without a backwards glance. In order to build that base, Africa, more specifically, problems which specific African countries face, must be made visible in the US. Beyond merely portraying Africa as 'corrupt' and the site of ultimate despair, Africa needs to be projected as having both strengths and weaknesses, failures and successes.<sup>5</sup> How few Americans, for instance, know that the numbers of

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<sup>4</sup> Here I have in mind the very cogent and sound policy framework enunciated by Professor Merle Bowen and Bill Minter in their article, "Wanted: A New U.S. Africa Policy," Champaign Urbana News Gazette, September 7, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The insightful journalist Charlayne Hunter Gault refers to this constant negating of Africa by US

women parliamentarians in African countries' legislative bodies rival the representation levels of the world's leaders in this arena- Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries. We need news that gets specific African success stories with African heroes and heroines- substantive victories coverage- unto American living room TV screens!<sup>6</sup>

Changing the way Africa is represented and successfully re-framing some of the problems which African countries face may well necessitate a specific strategy and a political campaign for just that purpose. As part of that undertaking we need to re-cast and project African leadership as being more than Idi Amin in the "King of Scotland"-corrupt, psychotic, stupid and mean. Africa has produced and continues to produce dynamic and impressive leaders(many of them women) and it is they who need to be projected to audiences in the US. Professor Barbara Ransby, the prominent scholar on African American leaders and leadership, pointed out recently that "the images of Africa today are of corrupt and helpless suffering and that it is hard to mobilize unless that frame is changed."<sup>7</sup>

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media as the 4 D's of African coverage-death,disease,disaster and despair. See her new book, *New News Out of Africa:Uncovering Africa's Renaissance*, (2006) Oxford, p. 72 +.

<sup>6</sup> Is this not an arena in which some of the Hollywood-types who profess to love Africa can be of assistance?

<sup>7</sup>Professor Barbara Ransby in Jan 5, 2009 letter to the author. Professor Ransby is the author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Univ. of North Carolina, 2003) and is now writing a political biography of Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson.



As discussed earlier, the extensive international linkages of the US anti-apartheid movement was a major touchstone for its various achievements. A degree of internationalism characterized almost all the various campaigns ranging from the bank loans withdrawals and divestment campaigns to the cultural and sports boycotts.<sup>8</sup> Through globalization, world economic and technological forces, the world today is more closely bound than the world of the 1970's and 80's. The new Obama/Biden administration will necessarily be sensitive to Africa advocacy initiatives coming from multilateral sources. It well behooves national Africa advocacy organizations and organizations of Africans living in the USA to reach out and work in tandem with countries like Sweden and international organizations like Oxfam and Save the Children, UK, all of which have a demonstrable history of progressive work on the African continent.

*'the struggle will require long distance runners, not sprinters...'*  
(Robert Van Leirop, filmmaker, 'A Luta Continua' 1972<sup>9</sup>)

It will be imperative that we adopt a long term approach as we organize to

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<sup>8</sup> Detailed discussions of this are available in Minter, William, et.al., No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over half a Century, 1950-2000, (2008), Africa World Press, Trenton and in Fieldhouse, Roger, Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain. (2005) Also in the various Nordic country histories published by the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, e.g., Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa, Vol. I& II. (1999)

<sup>9</sup> Film, video, music, dance, and art, not books and journals, are the preferred media of choice for the emerging generations on both sides of the Atlantic. Africa advocacy groups need to become more conversant in these channels. California Newsreel and the National Hip Hop Convention should be consulted more on best practices for reaching the younger generations-the 'continuadores.'

move the Obama administration to formulate a new, cogent and constructive Africa policy. It is not going to be an easy task. As William Minter recently noted:

“Preoccupation with domestic crises, reliance on the conventional wisdom of Clinton re-treads within the foreign policy establishment, and the overwhelming weight of unilateral and conventional thinking among U.S. policy-makers will severely constrain the more open vision of Obama's inspirational multilateralism. Prospects for different outcomes will depend not only on the incoming president himself, but on pro-Africa initiatives from the continent itself and its advocates in the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

Obtaining a progressive US foreign policy towards Africa is going to require organizing that is resolute, persistent and grounded in sharp strategizing.

Levels of communication and outreach not achieved by the anti-apartheid movement during the 1950's – 1980's will be mandatory. The effort will require public education, web-based organizing and face-to-face mobilizing.

The organizing to be done must learn from the positives and the negatives provided by the US peace and justice movements. Careful study of these historic undertakings should be done. Particular attention should be paid to ways the peace movement scored successes in getting major media to cover stories according to how the peace movement framed them. The American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC) 2007-2008 *Eyes Wide Open: The Human Cost of War* campaign is a case in point.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Minter, William, Editor's Note: “USA/Africa: Reflections on the Transition”, [Africa Focus Bulletin](#), November 18, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The negative lessons from the US peace movement's history must also be carefully scrutinized. Leading



In this campaign to have the incoming Obama administration pursue a comprehensively progressive foreign policy towards African countries, no sectors can be ignored. The effort should be an “All-in” project<sup>12</sup> that reaches out to all racial, class, gender, sexuality and ablement groupings in the USA. Initiatives addressing African needs, e.g., in health and education, must be linked to domestic US struggles about similar issues. (Both TransAfrica Forum and Africa Action have a commendable history of taking this very approach –and taking it in a very principled manner-in the work they have been doing addressing the world’s AIDS/HIV crisis.) What is imperative is more public education-speakers and classes, film showings, story telling and drama, sermons, song and dance telling stories, trips to Africa, all this geared at educating more Americans to Africa and its diverse and manifold realities. We must do this, for if we learned nothing else in the early anti-apartheid movement days, we learned that people cannot respond to what they don’t understand. For a long, long time people just couldn’t grasp what “apartheid” was all about. In the early years of organizing around apartheid much energy and patience was expended just trying to help people

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activist scholar, James Thindwa, a Zimbabwean himself, noted in a recent article that “the lack of black voices in the peace movement was particularly dissonant because the [black] community overwhelmingly opposes the Iraq war.” See Thindwa, James, “Where is the Dream? In These Times, January 31, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1961, a year after the ANC, PAC and SACP had been banned, an ‘All-In’ Unity Conference was successfully held near Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. An “underground” Nelson Mandela managed to address the assembled group.

better understand what apartheid was all about. US citizens today must gain a much better understanding of what they view as “the too complicated” issues of Africa (Like “debt” “structural adjustment” “UNCTAD” and “humanitarian interventionism” )before they become more sensitive to the justice/injustice around these issues, see how they are related to their own lives, and then begin to mobilize about them. John Nichols, a Madison Wisconsin journalist summarized the challenge we face doing organizing on Africa far more eloquently than I can in a recent Progressive magazine article when he wrote:

The way to influence Obama and his Administration is to speak not so much to him as to America. Get out ahead of the new President, and of his spin-drive communications team. Highlight the right appointees and the right responses to deal with the challenges that matter most. Don't just critique, but rather propose. Advance big ideas and organize on their behalf; identify allies in federal agencies, especially in Congress, and work with them to dial up the pressure for progress. Don't expect Obama or his aides to do the left thing.<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, there are various communities that must be brought into our campaigning and work to give Africa and African countries a better chance. An irreplaceable participant community in this campaign, if not the irreplaceable participant is the large and growing sector of recent African immigrants to the US and the emerging second and third generations of Africans(from parents born in Africa) born in the US.

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<sup>13</sup> Nichols, John, “How to Push Obama,” The Progressive, January, 2009:22, as quoted in Zeleza,Paul,”The Dawn of the Obama Era: In Memory of the Ancestors,” The Zeleza Post, <http://www.zeleza.com/node/726/print>



The late Phillipe Wamba- son of an African American mother and an African father, journalist and magna cum laude Harvard University graduate, killed prematurely in an auto crash- in his 1999 book Kinship envisioned how future organizing in the USA on Africa's behalf would grow out of the seeds planted in previous decades when he concluded:

“Today unprecedented numbers of Africans and West Indians live in the United States, adding further diversity and color to an already varied black population. And, faced with many of the same issues as American-born blacks in the United States, many feel motivated to collectively address common problems and add their voices to a black chorus calling for change... To have an impact, we will need to build a mass movement of the sort that existed in the 1940's, when organizations like the Council for African Affairs underlined the linkages between struggles for black freedom in America and Africa and fought for the liberation of all black people....”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wamba, Phillipe, Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America, (1999) Penguin, New York, pp 331 + 349.